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ABSTRACT

Some principles upon which writing assignments can be built include the following: (1) different skills are involved in the steps of writing, rewriting, editing, and proofreading; (2) writing is a subconscious act involving the holistic powers of the right brain; (3) students become aware of their performance through accurate feedback; (4) real learning comes only when there is inner motivation; (5) students should avoid false goals and divided wills; (6) the more the students become involved in the writing task, the more effort is applied; (7) concentration and enjoyment are essential to the best kind of writing; and (8) quality work comes only with oneness with the task. An application of these principles to writing exercises can involve an assignment such as asking students to write in a personal journal each week. This allows students to feel free to write and express their ideas without concern for writing for an English teacher. The journal can also serve as a sourcebook for later writing assignments. Free writing assignments help students to write without consciously thinking about ideas. Shared writing experiences create real audiences for what the students have to say and make the student care about and be aware of audience response. Appropriate teacher and peer responses offer students accurate feedback for writing improvement to occur. Finally, a series of assignments that encourage students to write for fun can take advantage of imitation as a means of helping students to become aware of different styles from different authors and of incorporating those things into their own style. (HOD)

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INNER-TENNIS PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO WRITING
A PRESENTATION MADE AT THE CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE
COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION
MARCH 17 - 19, 1983
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

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I. PRINCIPLES

I have gleaned the principles upon which my writing assignments are based from a variety of sources. These sources are listed in the bibliography.

A. Different skills are involved in the steps of writing, rewriting, editing and proofreading. Because different skills are involved with each of these steps, writing assignments need to be geared toward the skills in the writing process which the teacher wishes to emphasize and develop.

B. Writing is a subconscious act involving the holistic powers of the right brain. But whether analytical and logical skills are left brain and holistic and intuitive skills are right brain is not my main concern. What is giving writing assignments to use both kinds of skills. As you talk you notice you are not consciously choosing each word or sentence. Somewhere from the subconscious the ideas are generated into speech and come out. The same happens in the initial writing process. We think through ideas, but as they finally come out in words on the page we are not consciously thinking of individual words. The conscious work comes during the rewriting, editing and

proofreading steps. The steps obviously are not always distinct and separate.

C. We become aware of our current performance through accurate feedback. Gallway says that simply being aware of where the ball hits in tennis playing will cause unconscious adjustments and improvement. The same is true in writing - Feedback about current performance will cause unconscious or subconscious adjustments.

D. "The only discipline is self-discipline." (From Beat Not the Poor Desk). Applied to writing this means real learning comes only when there is inner motivation. The student must care about his own learning.

E. Avoid false goals, divided will. You never have to force yourself to enjoy a good meal or a great date. Any task where much energy goes to wishing you were elsewhere doing something else is a lost cause. It will never be done well.

F. There is a difference between giving more effort to a task and trying harder. When we come to love a task and are thoroughly involved in it, then more effort is applied. Students often marvel that on some assignments they work and struggle only to receive a mediocre grade. While on another occasion with seemingly no effort at all, they produce a paper which receives a high grade.

G. Concentration and enjoyment are essential to the best kind of writing. There must be intrinsic enjoyment of the writing. You've all experienced becoming so involved in a task you enjoy that you are no longer aware of time.

H. A number of writers suggest that quality work comes only with oneness with the task. Rules don't help. When you are at one with the task there is no sense of the passage of time. Someone recorded that when Albert Einstein was a young man he took violin lessons for eight years without great success. He mastered the mechanics of the music but failed to produce quality. However, when he finally came to love his music, he made it beautiful. "Love," he observed, "is a better teacher than a sense of duty." The best work comes when you care.

My intention in the writing assignments I give is to get my students so involved in ideas and the intuitive holistic writing that they forget themselves and come to enjoy putting words on the page. They come to create quality work because they care about what they have to say.

II. APPLICATIONS

Here are some of the assignments I have found successful in involving students in writing and having them come to enjoy putting words on the page.

A. Journals. I assign my students to write in a journal a minimum of 75 minutes each week spread over at least five days. They report to me the amount of time they have written in the journal. I do not read the journals unless students wish to share items from the journal with me. Occasionally I have them turn the journals in so that I can see that they are actually writing, but again I do not read them. By not reading the journals I assure that the students will feel free to write and express their ideas without concern for writing for an English teacher.

I have them write in a journal for a number of reasons. First, it serves as a sourcebook for some of the initial narrative writing assignments. Second, it is one of the ways most students can come up with real detail. Third, and most important, what the students record are things that they really care about.

B. Free Writing. I've found free writing to be one way to get students' ideas flowing. It helps to get the student warmed up to writing and so is a useful tool at the beginning of a writing period. I encourage students to use it at home when they have difficulty getting ideas coming on an assignment. It helps them get in the mood for writing. It helps them write without consciously thinking about the ideas; therefore, it encourages the synthetic, intuitive ideas from the right brain. It serves as an outlet for feelings, often helps students find topics, and discover ideas which are important to them. Finally, it does improve writing because it helps students relax while they write.

C. Sharing Writing. If writing really matters, it matters largely as a means of communicating ideas to others. The others should be more than just the teacher of the class.

I encourage students to share writing with small groups within the class and also to share the writing with friends or roommates. This helps them create a real audience for what they have to say. It makes the writer care about his audience's response and aware of audience response. It forces reader-based prose as opposed to writer-based prose and creates a real caring and sharing situation.

D. Appropriate Teacher and Peer Responses. One of the principles is that as we become more aware of our current performance through accurate feedback improvement naturally occurs. Gallway, for example, suggests that simply telling a tennis player where the ball is hitting helps him control where the ball goes. The same thing occurs in writing. On rough drafts, therefore, I try to mark only those things which will help a student make choices about changing ideas to accomplish his own purposes. I tell him how his writing affects me as a reader. I note grammar and mechanical problems only as appropriate to a rough draft.

As the semester progresses, I mark less and less on the rough drafts and simply respond as the student has specific questions about his rough draft.

On the final draft I put a grade. I point out the strengths of the paper. I use an evaluation sheet with comments, and I note the grammar and mechanical errors.

I also encourage the students to participate in small groups where I give the following guidelines to the student responses to one another's writing. These ideas come in general from Beat Not the Poor Desk.

1. All responses should be positive.
2. They may be observation responses.
3. They may be sincere questions.

The positive responses might be statements such as, "I like this because..." and then an explanation and indication of the area the reader liked.

The observations would be such things as "I didn't understand this passage," or "I felt this way when I read this part".

Sincere questions might be "Did you mean this by this passage?", "Did you want me to feel...?"

Peer responses should not be harsh criticisms or comments about how it should have been written. The author is to decide how to write it. Suggestions on how to write it must be perceived as suggestions only and not the way.

E. Writing For Fun. I do a series of assignments which encourage students to write for fun and become involved in writing. These also take advantage of imitating as a means to help students become aware of different styles from different authors and incorporate those things into their own style which they find reflect their own personalities.

First, word play. I give the students a handout sheet of various kinds of simple one-line word plays, puns, definitions, and have them try a few. Then during one class period we imitate a simple passage from Lewis Carroll's The Walrus and the Carpenter. They find this simple rhyme scheme easy to follow and the rhythm easy to imitate. I have them pick a different idea and substitute word for word through the passage. They are always amazed at how many different ideas can use the same form.

We then move to a simple poem by E.E. Cummings involving the arrangement of three or four words to create meanings. After we discuss the Cummings poem, I have them take three or four words and rearrange them in a way to create different meanings by the arrangement.

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Finally, I assign them a longer imitation. With my help they pick an author whom they admire and whose style would be worth imitating and write a long passage imitating the style of that author.

Summary

My purpose in these writing assignments is to create a oneness between the writer and his writing so students turn to writing as a natural method of learning, of recording experience, and of communicating.

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